

# Hither & Thither

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## The Seven Potentially Deadly Sins of Safety

By Gary Helmer

The *Seven Deadly Sins* (vanity, avarice, envy, wrath, lust, gluttony, and sloth) are over 17 centuries old but were not codified until the sixth century by Pope Gregory the Great. These sins were identified around the same time the Bible was being translated and are found throughout - from Genesis to Revelation.

Their applicability today is contentious given the state of society, but nonetheless they do exist. In 1993, a music television network did a special on the *Seven Deadly Sins* which involved interviewing some well-known entertainers. These pillars of civilization mostly agreed that these particular sins were really not vices and that the list was "dumb." I find such comments rather disheartening.

I started thinking of the things that are often repeated in pre-accident and accident scenarios and came up with my own list of sins. They are:

### I. Procrastination

Why do now what you can do much later? We have all done it, put off doing something intentionally, often with less than desirable consequences. We wait until the last minute to do our taxes; pay bills, or even clean out the garage until it is in such a clutter that we don't know where to start. But, what about delaying or waiting too long to fix or repair something that creates or exacerbates a safety hazard? Especially after it has been identified and properly reported as a safety-related issue!

Near the main entrance of a local installation the traffic light had quit working. It was completely out of service, and during peak periods the traffic was particularly congested. The agency responsible for its repair had been notified but had made no attempt to restore the broken traffic signal. (I later learned that it had been out of commission for four days.)

One dark morning during this period, I happened to be exiting the post when I noticed a bus across the street dropping off

passengers. I was a little concerned as the throng approached the street to cross, some in the crosswalk and others in the street. They were having a good time talking and laughing, paying little attention to crossing the four-lane, and seemingly oblivious to the malfunctioning traffic signal.

Just then a car crested the hill some sixty yards away traveling much too fast to stop. As he broached the crowd, the driver swerved left, right, then left again, honking his horn wildly and barely missing more than a few in the surprised group. I was amazed that no one had been hit - I just knew I was witnessing a tragedy.

Having maneuvered through the pack the driver kept going, but those in the street got a big chuckle out of it all. Were those laughs of joy I heard or the giggles of nervous relief at having survived near certain disaster?

I made an immediate call to the local authorities and told them what had just happened. Within a short time a crew was there fixing the light. Why did



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such a hazard take so long to get mitigated?

## II. Ignorance

We have all heard this adage "ignorance is bliss" and probably have had a blissful moment or two ourselves. As adults, we have some notion of what will hurt us, and what won't. Children on the other hand, have a right of passage through learning these things on the road to adulthood. However, we are part of that process and must ensure that they know the rules and the proper use of equipment that is designed to protect them from harm.

I was at the scene of a minor traffic accident one afternoon when I noticed several bicyclists approaching the intersection. In the lead was a woman followed by two children, then another lady and two more children. They had stopped at the junction to appraise the activities surrounding the vehicle accident. The first woman had no bicycle helmet but the children each had helmets draped uselessly over the handlebars of their bikes. I took the opportunity to do my safety

thing and approached the woman asking her why they were not wearing bicycle helmets. Without responding to me, she turned to the children and blurted, "Why aren't you wearing those helmets like mommy told you!" With that, the children quickly donned their helmets, mom smiled, and off the procession went.

I can only imagine what was going through the minds of those youngsters, not the least of which was confusion. One moment their mother actively condoned not wearing the helmets, and the next she publicly chastised them into conformance. The children may have gotten part of the message, albeit a mixed signal, but the woman missed it altogether as she blissfully pedaled away.

## III. Complacency

World events have forever changed the way we live and act in our daily lives. Many of the things we took for granted have been inexorably modified and we are forced to adapt our once comfortable routines to accommodate the changes. Travelers notice an increased presence of

security personnel in airports, train stations, parking lots, and other public venues. Our streets are patrolled more often and by greater numbers of police and security personnel. There is an increase in neighborhood watch groups, and our lives are suddenly less private.

We are on edge and very concerned. We worry at every turn that some evil might lurk in a hidden corner where we least expect it. We plan our activities with greater detail and vary our daily regimen a bit to be a little less predictable. We want to be prepared. But, who is the enemy? Who should we watch out for? There are many fanatical factions in the world that could justifiably be labeled an enemy. However, of all the multifaceted dangers that do present themselves, complacency may well be our biggest adversary.

Complacency is a self-satisfied state of mind oblivious to any danger present. We regularly experience complacency in our personal lives and at our jobs. The key is being cognizant of its existence and the measures we can



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take to off set any negative consequences.

The places we feel the most familiar with can be the most perilous since the menace is not so obvious to us. When we feel confident that the environment is stable we often forget that things are subject to change and becoming precarious in an instant. We must learn to react and interact with our surroundings to ensure we are alert to the possibilities of catastrophe.

Complacency is an attitude and that attitude determines how we respond to given situations. How many times have we heard this statement, "We have always done it that way?" Of course, it must be right if it has stood the test of time and repetitiveness. Not necessarily true! The very fact that it is repeated often can draw us into the complacency trap – we learn to expect proven results until one day the outcome changes for the worse.

Complacency is a known problem and must be clearly recognized as a cause factor in accidents. There is no cure for

complacency, but we must be ever diligent in our prevention efforts. J.C. Ryle so aptly wrote, "Do not suppose that it needs some great scarlet sin to bring you to the pit of destruction. You have only to sit still and do nothing, and you will find yourself there at last."

## IV. Cluelessness

Have you ever been around someone that was completely or hopelessly bewildered, unaware, ignorant, or foolish? I once worked with someone so afflicted in an office setting at a university. When asked to complete a task, he would do it willingly, no questions asked. There was one small problem however, no matter what the project was it always had to be corrected or, in most cases, done over from scratch.

It was the completion of the act and not the product that he took satisfaction in. To him, getting it done meant that it was done – it did not have to be completed with any degree of quality.

Even when told of this peculiar practice he never did comprehend the fact that he created more work

for the rest of us. "If you want it done right, do it yourself," certainly rang true in this case.

In studies completed on the clueless, it has been shown that they very often believe that they are expert or at a level of skill/knowledge far greater than persons who maintain some semblance of cluefulness. The problems created by this phenomenon differ from those caused by ignorance. The ignorant can be trained, and once they are armed with the know-how they usually do not repeat the same errors. The clueless however, cannot be taught and will actually repel any attempt at correction believing instead that their misguided concepts are most right.

## V. Acquiescence

"If you are not part of the solution, you are part of the problem." Simply going along with something and taking no part in correcting a bad situation is acquiescence.

There exists a predicament involving a few personnel that inhabit civil service positions at United States



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Army flight simulator training facilities worldwide. The majority of the positions they occupy are classified as "flight training instructor" or "flight training specialist" and several entail duties that are restricted by regulation to qualified instructor pilots or instrument flight examiners.

Paradoxically, many of these personnel are not qualified flight instructors or instrument flight examiners, others are not qualified in the aircraft related to the flight simulator they "perform" duties in, and some are not even rated aviators. Few if any, have been administered the evaluations required by regulation to obtain or maintain status as an instructor pilot or instrument flight examiner. In actuality they are "pseudo-instructors" reaping the advantages of a position, but providing no real benefit to the aircrew training programs they are paid to support.

One amongst them has audaciously assumed the title of "Supervisory Helicopter Flight Instructor Pilot" yet he has never been qualified as a flight

instructor for the Army or the Federal Aviation Administration, and meets none of the requirements as such. He enjoys full autonomy in "instructing" Army aviators and supervising "training" at two flight training facilities.

These misdeeds were exposed several years ago and have repeatedly been brought to the attention of a number of agencies since. Each time an "investigation" ensues and the individuals involved are exonerated. The fact is that the problem has not gone away and with the assent of their superiors, it continually gets ignored and covered up. Accepting lower or no standards of regulatory conformance erodes the proficiency of the aircrews being trained and may have catastrophic results if left unimpeded.

This is definitely acquiescence, but because several of these individuals have embellished their qualifications, the people supporting their employment may very well have crossed the line into complicity.

## VI. Complicity

Deliberately breaking rules, laws, and regulations is a transgression and knowingly assisting in the commission of such a wrongful act is complicity.

Those familiar with the Department of Defense know that there is strict prohibition against smoking in buildings, vehicles, and aircraft. Smoking is also explicitly prohibited, with few exceptions, at or near (within 50 feet) the entrance to any building owned, leased, or rented by the Federal Government. The idea is to prevent having non-smokers pass through the second-hand smoke while going into or coming out of a building. It also helps reduce the amount of second-hand smoke that enters the building and potentially exposing those inside to its ill effects.

Recently, I noticed that a group of people employed at a local headquarters was abusing the Army's regulation (AR 600-63) banning smoking in certain areas. They were congregating directly at the main entrance of this particular building to smoke and we were all steering around the hazard when



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entering or exiting the place.

I made it known that this was a direct violation of regulations and that something needed to be done to correct it. In very short order, signs were placed appropriately and the smokers had moved a distance away to take their breaks. I was pleased that someone had enough gumption to right the wrong and even had the requisite signs placed to emphasize the rule.

You can imagine my chagrin when a few weeks later the signs had disappeared and the clouds of smoke had reappeared. There they were, stationed at the doorway knowingly and willfully breaking the regulation.

As I thought about this blatant disregard for policy, it dawned on me that the smokers were not alone in their violation and probably did not take the signs down – that had to be approved by someone in authority. Not only were the smokers breaking the rules, key officials had become complicit to it.

This raises two very critical issues: It is a clear signal to the employees and others that the rules can be broken (albeit selectively) and; that the boss supports such a practice. Once the rules are broken, the standards will change. Where do we draw the line now?

## VII. Stupidity

The comedian Bill Engvall has made a living out of reminding us of the not so smart things we do or have done. He humorously quips, “Stupid people should have to wear signs. That way you won’t ask them to do anything.” The problem is that we all might have to wear these signs on occasion.

There is a tendency to confuse ignorance with stupidity, but actually they have quite different meanings. Ignorance is simply lacking the knowledge or comprehension of the thing specified where as stupidity is knowing better but doing it any way.

The clear and undisputed champion of stupid is driving under the influence of alcohol and/or drugs. This offense injures or kills

thousands of innocent people each year and causes untold damage to lives and property. It also wreaks havoc on the life of the perpetrator through injury or death, fines or imprisonment, loss of job or family, and living with the guilt of having hurt or killed someone.

I realize that the list could be much longer, but I wanted to highlight what I felt were some real issues in our focus on safety. How do we prevent the occurrence of these failings? How do we teach the unteachable? How do we get to those who won’t listen?

It is imperative to insist on strict conformance to standards, to castigate noncompliance, and to continue an effort to educate wherever possible. Hopefully we can make some progress, but we have a long way to go.  
*gwh/03*

### **Parting Thought**

**“It’s not what you take when you go, it’s what you’ve left behind that counts.”**

**Your comments and suggestions are always welcome!**

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## Safety Code of Ethics

- ☒ **Safety is our highest priority.**
- ☒ **The command will lead the safety process.**
- ☒ **Safety is a shared responsibility of everyone in the organization.**
- ☒ **No known unsafe act or condition will be allowed to continue without taking immediate action to mitigate the risk.**
- ☒ **Safety performance is a key indicator of organizational excellence and will be integrated into all of our activities and functions.**
- ☒ **We will communicate safety openly with all employees, family members, and visitors.**
- ☒ **All employees will be given the knowledge and tools to perform their jobs and activities in a safe manner.**
- ☒ **We will extend our safety efforts beyond the workplace to include our homes and communities.**
- ☒ **We will continually strive to improve safety and health within the organization.**